

SHARP PRACTICE

Nefarious horological goings-on

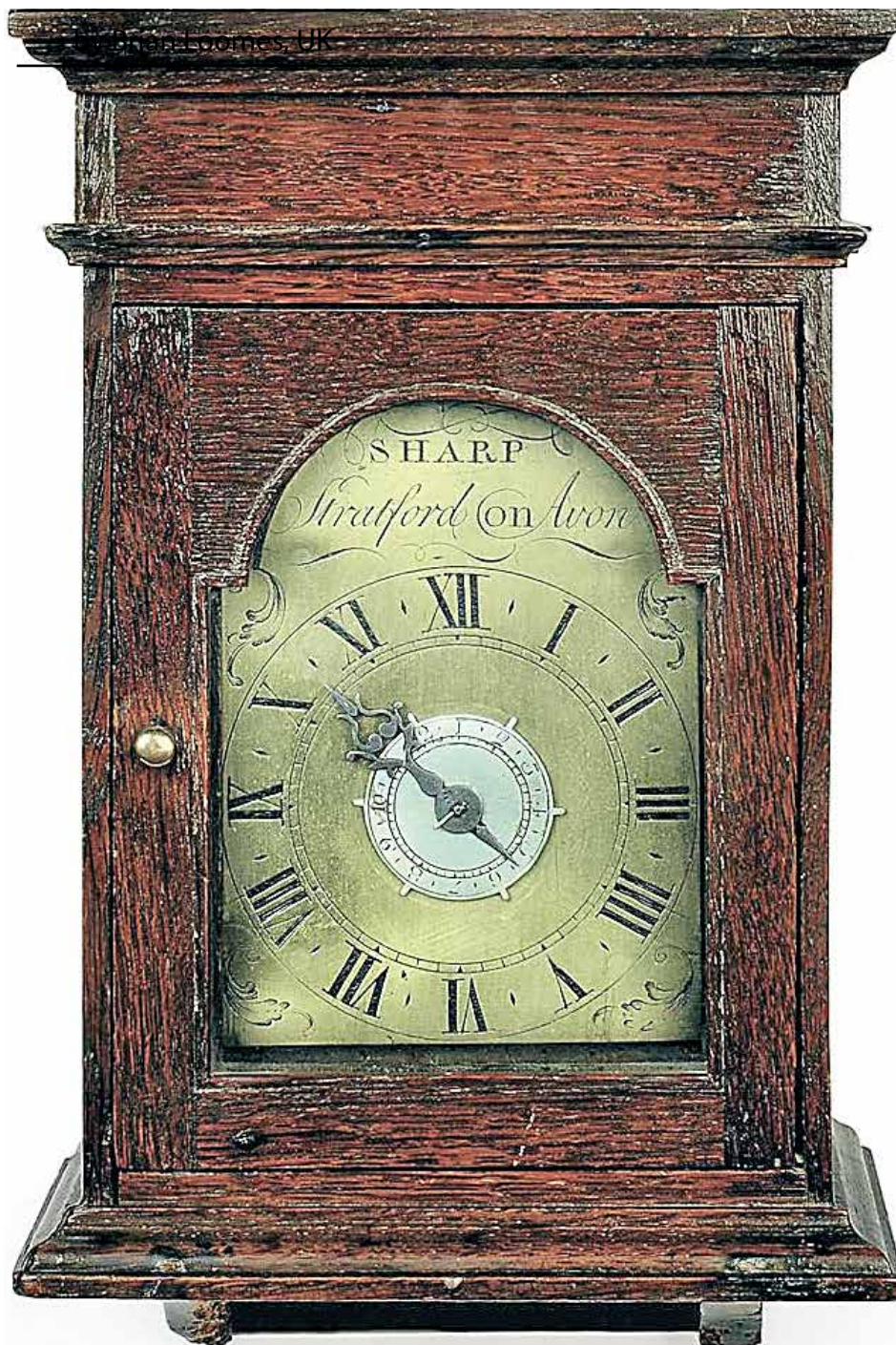
I was contacted recently by a correspondent, Colin Hodgson, who told me he owned an early nineteenth century longcase clock by Thomas Gibbs of Stratford-upon-Avon. He got in touch not because of the clock itself—though from the photographs of it pictured here we can see it is a very respectable example—but

Figure 1. Thomas Sharp is best known for his longcase clocks and this tiny, mid-eighteenth-century hooded alarm timepiece is an unusual item for him. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Christies, London.

because he had come across an event in the clockmaker's life that he thought I might find interesting. And he was right. But neither of us imagined at that time what a fascinating journey that would take us on.

'A bit of info you might find interesting re Thos Gibbs—Stratford-upon-Avon listed in your book 'Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World' as operating 1828-54.

'I recently acquired a white dial 8-day longcase of his & after research found



he had been assistant to Thos Sharp (clockmaker) who retired in 1795 and died in 1799. And now for the really interesting bit. In 1828 Gibbs's shop at 31 High Street, Stratford, was broken into during the night by a gang of four men. While Gibbs slept on they emptied a cabinet of watches, brooches etc & made their escape.

'Next morning Gibbs discovered the break-in & raised the alarm. Stratford had only one constable and he and a local farmer set off on horseback after being told the gang had been heard leaving on the Birmingham road in the early hours.

'The chase ended in the Plume of Feathers pub at Shirley where they surprised the gang sharing out the spoils. A fight ensued & a flintlock pistol was pointed at the constable but misfired. After a chase one of the gang escaped but the others were apprehended.

At Warwick they were sentenced to death which was commuted to Transportation for life "aboard the hulk Retribution"!

Colin drew some of his report from a book in the 'Murder & Crime Series—Stratford upon Avon' by Nick Billingham published by the History Press Ltd.

I discovered later that Thomas Gibbs was baptised at Preston on Stour, Worcestershire, on 17th March 1782, the son of Richard and Sarah Gibbs. There appears to be no record that Thomas Gibbs was ever apprenticed

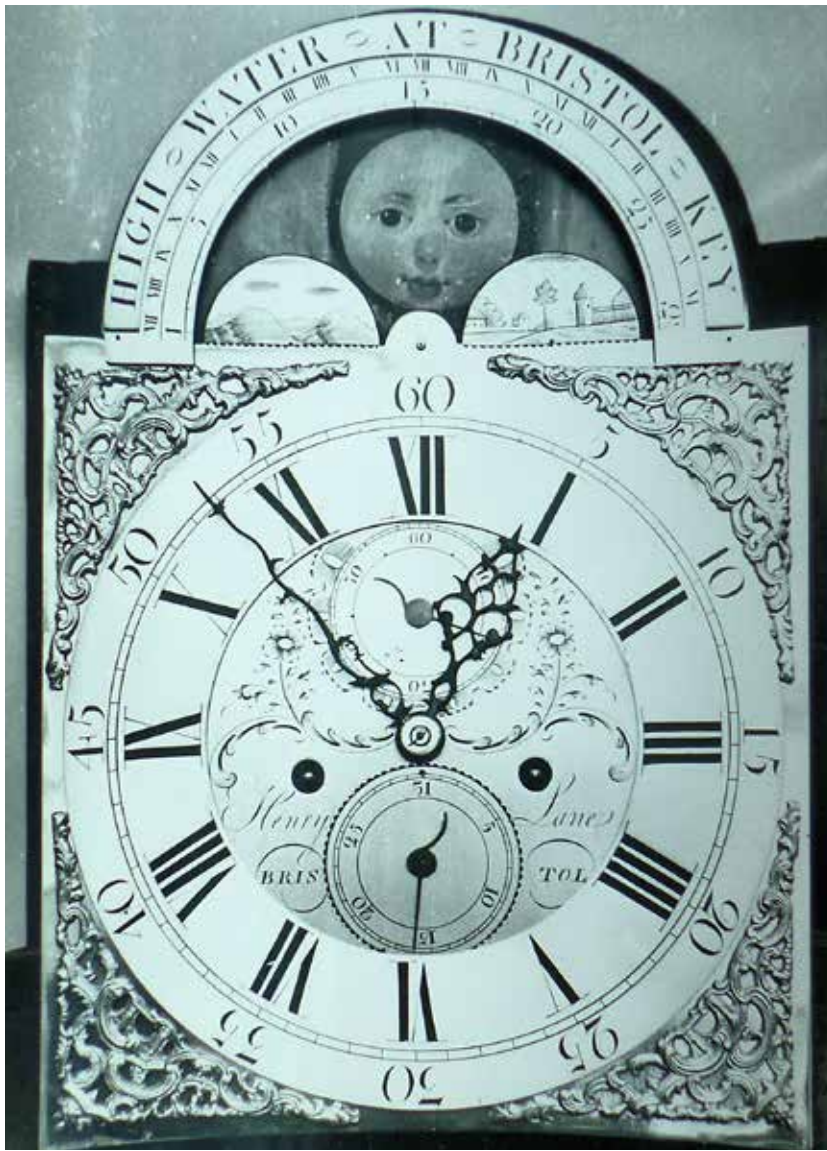


Figure 2. Dial of a fine, late-eighteenth-century eight-day clock with moon and tides by Henry Lane of Bristol.



Figure 3. The case of the clock in figure 2 is one of the finest quality Bristol cases of the period in the best West Indian mahoganies.



to Thomas Sharpe. If apprenticed at the usual age of 14, this would have been about 1796 (to 1803), supposedly after Sharpe had retired (in 1795)! Nevertheless he is reputed to have been an assistant to Sharpe, but would still have been only 17 in 1799 when Sharpe died.

An official apprenticeship involved a legal undertaking to train a lad for a set period usually seven years. This involved the master paying a tax of a shilling in the pound on the premium, though poor boys were exempt. Records of duty paid since 1710 have been preserved by the Inland Revenue and their records show no apprenticeship for Thomas Gibbs.

It may be that if Thomas Sharp had in mind to retire about 1795 he would not think of taking on a boy for a formal

seven-year apprenticeship. But there was no reason he could not employ a bright young lad as an all-round assistant. Whether he was officially apprenticed or worked informally as an 'assistant', Thomas Gibbs became a very competent clockmaker. It is unlikely he worked on his own account before he was 20 or 21.

Thomas Sharp did take other apprentices, namely William Evans in 1759 for seven years at a premium of £15.15s.0d (£15.75), and Henry Lane on 24th Feb 1763 for seven years at a premium of £20.00s.0d (£20).

Henry Lane became an exceptionally skilled maker of clocks and watches, though somewhat less skilled at his secondary profession of forging banknotes, for which inadequacy he was

sentenced to death in 1802.

Lane was born in January 1748/49 at Haselor, Worcestershire (only five miles from Stratford), the son of John and Mary Lane, whose family seem to have been long resident there. Oddly enough a Henry Lane died at Haselor on 2nd February 1763, leaving a will, and we might speculate that he was related to young Henry (grandfather or uncle?) and that a bequest enabled his parents to pay the £20 premium for his apprenticeship later that month.

What is not speculation is that Henry Lane was working in Bristol by 1771, where he is believed to have married and produced children and led an apparently industrious life until the winter of 1799. In January 1800 in a bit of a mid-life crisis he abandoned wife and



Figure 4. Another fine eight-day clock with moon and tides by Henry Lane of Bristol, this example now in the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.



Figure 5. The Bristol case of the Powerhouse Museum clock is another fine mahogany example, though not quite so grand as the previous example.

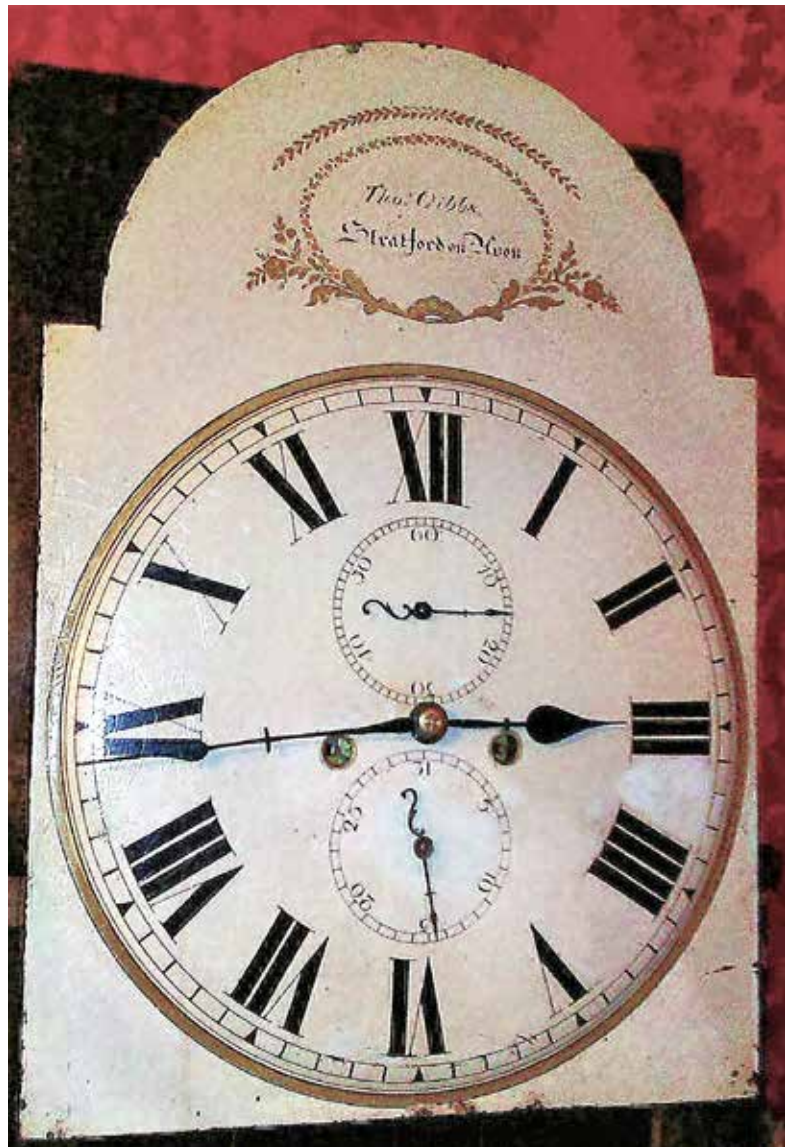


Figure 6. Dial of a longcase clock of about 1840 by Thomas Gibbs of Stratford, the dialmakers Finnemore of Birmingham. Photograph by Colin Hodgson.

children to run off with a lady companion and a pocketful of counterfeit banknotes.

Having taken the coach to Chipping Sodbury, Henry and his companion, Charlotte Holland, took a room at the inn there. Then Charlotte went on a shopping spree with banknotes of unusually large denomination, passing at least four £5 notes—not a good idea on your first day in a small town. When one £5 note was recognised as a forgery, and then others, she was arrested. Henry fled but was chased and captured.

At his trial Henry claimed he had received the banknotes in payment of a debt. The fact that on his capture two forged banknotes were forcibly extracted from his mouth as he tried to chew and swallow them can hardly have helped his case. At the time he was

inexplicably travelling under the name of Smith, which could also have hampered his credibility. In April 1800 he was sentenced to death, later commuted to transportation for life.

After a voyage lasting six months on board the *Perseus* he arrived in Sydney Cove in August 1802, Charlotte following a year later. Before long the two were living together in Sydney and were eventually married. Henry Lane became Australia's first clockmaker and achieved great success and recognition for his truly outstanding talents, gaining a pardon in 1808. He died in 1815.

I know of only two clocks made by Lane in Bristol, both fine examples and both of which passed through my hands years ago. I sold the first about 1980 and the second in 1997 to the Powerhouse

Museum in Sydney. They are pictured here.

In one of his several advertisements in the *Sydney Gazette* he offered to make longcase clocks of a far more complicated nature with the option of not only moon dials but with a vast variety of automated figures, or musical quarters or choices of tunes, or organ clocks, priced anywhere between £100 and £500 according to complexity.

With reference to his criminal past, which was obviously known in the area, he suggested in one advertisement that if some wag asked him 'Can you produce one making money?' (ie to print banknotes), he would say that for £150 he certainly could make one with a scene of a working printing press, but it would be the purchaser who would



have to produce the money.

More detail of Henry Lane's life in Australia can be found in an article by John Houstone in 1991 in *THE AUSTRALIAN ANTIQUE COLLECTOR* magazine, which features the clock I had sold about 1980.

But we must return to the more mundane workshop of Thomas Sharpe in Stratford, where it seems something about the atmosphere must have fostered criminality. Sharpe died in 1799 so was spared hearing about the scandal of his former apprentice.

Thomas Sharpe was born in Stratford in 1724 and had four children born there between 1752 and 1761. Various

affidavits survive dating from 1843, half a century after Thomas had died, given by an elderly neighbour and a former servant of his, concerning property ownership. These are the sort of thing that lawyers always enjoyed as a good earner but that today come in very handy for researchers.

From these we learn that of Thomas Sharp's three surviving children, Maria and John died childless, and only his daughter Ann had children by her husband Charles Harbourne. Only one of Ann's children had issue, a boy named George Harbourne, and he married his niece, Mary Whitmore, daughter of his

aunt, Thomas Sharp's sister, Elizabeth.

(BRIAN, SURELY IF MARY IS THE DAUGHTER OF HIS AUNT SHE IS HIS COUSIN NOT HIS NIECE. I THINK THIS NEEDS A BIT OF CLARIFICATION.)

Not quite incestuous and at least it meant that the wealth accrued by three generations of descendants of two brothers came full circle and stayed in the family. So Thomas Sharp's family became extinct in the male line, and his only successor in the trade was former assistant Thomas Gibbs.

Gibbs ran his own business at 31 Stratford High Street with his second wife, Elizabeth (nee Whitehead). I found

Figure 7 (far left). The case of Thomas Gibbs's clock is made of oak with extensive mahogany trim, typical of Midlands casemaking at this period. Photograph by Colin Hodgson

Figure 8 (left). This view of the hood shows the quarter-sawn oak and the extensive use of mahogany inlaid with stringing and banding. Photograph by Colin Hodgson

Figure 9. A banjo barometer sold by Thomas Gibbs of Stratford. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Bellmans auctioneers.



their marriage at Stratford on 9th October 1823, she a spinster, but the surprise was that he was already a widower. Details of his first marriage are unknown. He took over the property in 1823 from his wife's mother, also called Elizabeth Whitehead, by paying off her mortgage of £300.

We learn later that James Ward was apprenticed to him in 1820, later becoming an optician in Stratford from 1828 to 1835, and still living in 1877, then a truss maker. Thomas then took William Salmon as apprentice in 1828. In 1836 he took an apprentice for six years called Richard Lowe, a farmer's son from Southam.

The 1841 census shows him still living in the High Street with Elizabeth and a 16-year-old servant girl. In 1851 he was a widower again, this time living with a 36-year-old spinster niece to keep house.

We learn from later witnesses that in all he occupied 31 High Street from 1823 to 1857. In 1858 he let it to shoemaker, John Lockett, then to Lockett's widow. In 1856 he held a sale of jewellery, plate, furniture, etc, presumably downsizing his contents in readiness for a move to smaller premises in his retirement.

By 1861 he was a retired widower aged 79 with a 62-year-old widow as housekeeper and a teenage girl as a servant. But now he lived in what sounds like less palatial premises at 2 Tasker's Passage. This house linked the High Street property with the garden of John Tasker, the grocer, and was bought by Thomas Gibbs in 1835 for £190.

Gibbs' wife, Elizabeth, died in 1842 or 1844—I can't decide which of two burials is hers. He died on 28th November 1866 and was buried on 3rd December 1866 aged 84. His will was written on 25th February 1859 and was proved on 28th April 1867, the executors being Henry Cross of Hampton Lucy, farmer, and James Ward of Stratford, his former apprentice and now a trussmaker.

But I have not yet mentioned Gibbs' own lapses into crime. In March 1824 he appeared in court for 'selling plate without a licence' (je silver plate). Then on 4th March 1837 he was sentenced with others at Worcester Assizes to one year in jail for 'poaching in the night time'. Yet in 1847 and 1849 he was on the list of jurors. Perhaps a case of poacher become gamekeeper.

It was at this point in the research that two remarkable things happened. Colin was digging into some transcripts of the robbers' trial, which are kept at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford, when he learned that someone else was researching the same documents. This turned out to

Quantity	Item	Value	Quantity	Item	Value
7	Fruit Knives	2.0.0	2	Tortoiseshell Snuff Boxes	1.4.0
2	Pen Knives	.12.0	32	Silver Pencil cases	14.14.0
20	Watch Seals	14.0.0	1	Silver Watch	2.0.0
31	Watch Keys	10.0.0	3	Silver Dazzling Glasses	.12.0
100	Silver Thimbles	7.10.0	2	Gold Tooth Picks	.8.0
1	Glaziers Diamond	.18.0	15	Silver Tooth Picks	.19.0
55	Gold Pins	18.0.0	1	Gold mounted Mulberry Comb	.18.0
29	Brooches	13.0.0	3	Fair Silver Sugar Tongs	1.17.0
19	Pair Earrings & Drops	16.10.0	3	Silver Caddie Spoon	.18.0
6	Pair Gold Snaps	1.5.0	20	Ounces of Coral	13.0.0
2	Pair Buckles	.7.0	1	Pair Coral Bracelets	.5.0
7	Gold Rings	2.15.0	14	Coral Necklaces	9.0.0
6	Tooth Picks	.5.0	1	Pair Silver Tassels	.2.0
1	Tassee	.2.0	1	Scent Box	.7.0
27	Tortoise Shell Combs	5.0.0	140	Pieces of Paper	.0.6
2	Tortoiseshell Cases	.18.0			

Figure 10. This list of some of the items stolen from Thomas Gibbs in 1828 shows the great variety of goods sold by a typical clockmaker of the period. Photograph courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, reference ER11/13/97.

be Stephen Barnett of Adelaide, an Australian descendant of one of the robbers, John Windsor. Stephen tells me that John Windsor was his great, great, great grandfather on his mother's side of the family.

Windsor was the son of William Windsor, a carpenter of New Town Road Birmingham. Windsor gave his occupation as jeweller and he stated that he worked for Mr Broad. His prison record (from the hulk) indicates he had a prior conviction. He had been sentenced to three month's in 1826 for larceny or stealing from the person of Benjamin Pudge, a pocketbook, his property.

In 1828, he was found guilty of a charge of burglary on 9th May 1828 at Thomas Gibbs's shop in company with three others, William Vale, and William Slater and another un-named. The fourth man escaped during a fight at the inn. The prosecutors said 'the fourth man is beyond all doubt George Lees ... a Birmingham thief but he can't be identified'!

When he was caught John Windsor had a leather notebook listing the stolen items, presumably with a view to dividing the spoils. The goods were valued at over 150 shillings (£7.50p). On this

occasion the sentence was a capital one and the three were sentenced to death at the Warwick Assizes on the 9th August 1828.

About 16th September 1828, Windsor was taken with 12 other prisoners including his two co-accused, William Slater and William Vale, from the County Gaol to Sheerness, to the hulk, Retribution. The sentence of death had been commuted to Transportation for Life. He left Plymouth on the convict ship *Georgiana* on 15th December 1828 and arrived in Hobart Town on 20th April 1829 with 172 other convicts.

Apparently, John Windsor couldn't keep out of trouble. He was sentenced to two months on a treadmill and two years' hard labour after being caught 'in the act' with someone's wife on separate occasions. Nevertheless he married and had nine children and died at the Globe Hotel, Launceston, Tasmania, on 11th August 1891 at the age of 84, having become a general dealer in household goods.

This diversion into the aftermath of the robbery is not only interesting in itself but gives an insight we otherwise would not have into the variety of goods sold by Thomas Gibbs in a typical watchmaker's

shop of the early nineteenth century. A list of the stolen goods was produced at the trial and is re-printed here courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust at Stratford-upon-Avon. A footnote states there were other goods too, not listed.

The second remarkable thing was the discovery of a notebook. The name Shakespeare has dominated the history of Stratford for centuries to the point where many ancient documents to do with the town have been preserved under the Shakespeare banner. Nevertheless it came as a considerable surprise to discover an item of interest in a Shakespeare Library in Washington DC—the account book and memorandum book of clockmaker Thomas Sharp of Stratford and his successor, Thomas Gibbs. This appears to be the original manuscript ledger of 150 pages or so of their workaday trading. Only two such records are known in the history of eighteenth-century British clockmaking, so that makes it a rare discovery amongst those of us who find excitement in such things.

So what does this account book tell us? I'll let you know when my copy arrives. 📖